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ABSTRACT

The traditional approach to education has placed more importance on the role of the teacher in the teacher-student relationship. Such an approach has produced a nation of passive learners who can regurgitate facts but have little ability to reason, solve problems, or think critically or creatively. A junior high school language arts teacher who sought to help students develop as thoughtful decision makers identified time, curriculum, students' willingness to take risks, and students' self direction as areas of tension. The teacher developed a "decisive writer's model" to promote student risk taking and self direction. It became apparent that for the model to work successfully, learning conditions had to include: (1) teaching by facilitating; (2) structuring project guidelines; (3) reading the genre; (4) writing in the genre; (5) promoting student ownership of projects; (6) establishing specific evaluation criteria; and (7) assessing projects according to the criteria. Resulting student projects appeared in many forms, but writing was at the heart of each. Students wrote songs and newspaper style articles, drew posters and dioramas, or reenacted text scenes on videotape. Development of the model clarified the teacher's thinking about the role of decision making for students. Freedom to choose how they expressed themselves helped liberate their imaginations. (Four appendixes containing project ideas, a personal inventory, and evaluation sheets are attached.) (SG)

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THE DECISIVE WRITER'S MODEL: FREEING THE IMAGINATION

By Molly M. O'Connell

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THE DECISIVE WRITER'S MODEL: FREEING THE IMAGINATION

By Molly M. O'Connell

Traditionally, education has long placed more importance on the role of the teacher in the teacher-student relationship. She is the center of instruction, the dispenser of information, the daily decision-maker for the students. This type of schooling has produced a nation of passive learners who can regurgitate facts but have little ability to reason, problem solve or think critically or creatively. In his article discussing schooling and change, Rex Brown says that now many jobs - not just professions - are demanding more than just basic skills; they are requiring decision-making, flexibility, creativity and other thoughtful habits of the mind (Brown, p. 1-2). With these new requirements in the workplace come new demands that we look at schools and how we teach our students to meet these requirements.

Contrasts between workplace demands and how schools are educating students who will become part of that workplace were occupying my mind as I joined the Higher Literacy Project last September. If I really saw myself as an educator, then my responsibility to students was to help them develop as thoughtful decision makers who would be able to solve problems and think critically. Before I could do so, however, I felt I needed to focus on developing an atmosphere in which these kinds of activities could take place.

When I began teaching this year, I felt there were four tensions which I needed to resolve in order to accomplish my goal of creating a thoughtful classroom of students capable of critical thinking. Those tensions involved time, curriculum, students' willingness to take risks, and their self-direction. The first two tensions were fairly easily resolved. The third and fourth became the center of my research.

THE TENSIONS

Time (and the lack of it) was my first concern. Although the 45-minute class period was set in stone, I found I could negotiate extra time with a more-than-willing colleague and teammate. My social studies counterpart and I shared a common, movable wall. By planning ahead, we were able to determine which days we could open the wall and devote two class periods

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to a single project. As we moved the wall, so did we move aside the concern we had for time. As the wall bent and folded away, so did the problem I had with working within an inflexible time frame. Time for students to work was doubled, allowing them to be more focused and less rushed as they were in a 45-minute class period.

My second concern was curriculum. Our English curriculum required that at least 60% of our time be devoted to writing. Furthermore, there were specific literature requirements to fulfill. Fortunately, our curriculum guide is flexible so I had choices I could make within the guidelines. I decided the best way to focus on writing and still meet other curriculum demands was to teach specific literary genres and within each, students would write in that form. By doing so, I would not be teaching discrete grammar lessons (such as mechanics or parts of speech), but would approach each genre as a whole package, with grammar spelling, mechanics, etc., as part of that package. I based this plan on the Transactional Model of The Whole Language philosophy, which asserts that although "many children can memorize factual information and learn to respond correctly to worksheets and tests that assess mastery of . . . isolated skills, their learning of concepts and strategies and their mastery of complex processes like reading and writing is best faciliated by active involvements" (Weaver, p.22). By using an integrated approach, students would work on those specific skills that they needed in their actual writing.

I also knew the creativity and spontaneity I was encouraging would not flourish if students were afraid to take risks. If I or fellow students ridiculed or quashed ideas, students would not take risks in an environment they perceived as unsafe. I addressed this issue on the first day of school by stating that no scornful comments would be tolerated; every way we treated one another would be kind, courteous and thoughtful. Then for weeks we practiced. Each student presented small assignments to the class and I would model thoughtful, positive comments. The students took over that responsibility and learned to carefully remark about one another's work.

In response to a recreated episode from Where the Red Fern Grows, Ted Commented to Katy "*I liked the way you made Little Ann explain how scared she was when she fell through the ice on the river, but I don't get why she felt safe before Billy grabbed her.*" This kind of remark let Katy

know what part of her narrative Ted enjoyed and from this positive comment was able to hear about a problem that existed in her writing. By practicing, we established a safe atmosphere in which each person knew it was all right to take the risk of trying new ideas, however farfetched. Not only did each know he/she could share a new idea, but other students would contribute to that idea.

Once I had dealt with the issues of time, curriculum and risk-taking, I was free to focus on what has become the major thrust of my project: how to inspire students to be responsible for their own learning. At the heart of this issue, I realized, was encouraging each of them to become a careful decision maker. I realized that by becoming authors themselves, students would best understand each genre if they chose how to express it in their own words. I wanted them doing. I wanted them creating their own literary artifacts. And when they wrote their own, they truly would become authors (Romano, p.134) and would have taken over the responsibility for their learning. At the same time, thoughtfulness and critical thinking should occur. I decided to construct a model which would incorporate all the elements that I felt were important ones for 7th graders to know in order to grow as thinkers and learners.

I realized that if I gave students opportunities to make decisions about how they would display their learning, then creativity, as an expression of critical thinking, would occur. What did I mean by creativity? First, I saw it as allowing the imagination to be set free, to say that examining a subject from many perspectives was a worthwhile and exciting prospect. Second, students would exercise their creativity by recognizing what they knew and would contemplate what they didn't know. This synthesis of the known and unknown would generate a new product - whether it was a fairytale, poem or narrative piece - and would result in the creation of new ideas. Third, I defined creativity as the making of meaning. When students developed their own stories, they would bring new understanding to each form in which they wrote. They would enrich the form of that genre for themselves.

THE DECISIVE WRITER'S MODEL

In this model, students would be exploring specific genres; this would be the framework for everything we did in Langugage Arts. Those genres would be the novel, folklore, children's literature, drama and poetry. Each

student would display his/her understanding of each genre through a culminating activity. Writing was at the heart of these projects. Within the requirements of the genre (which students would ascertain from their reading) they would become authors of their own fictitious episode, folktale, children's story, dramatic sketch or poems.

What I discovered during the development of this model was that a number of conditions had to be present for it to work successfully. When one element was missing, the projects didn't succeed. These vital conditions necessary for successful projects were:

* teaching by facilitating
* structuring guidelines for the projects
* reading the genre
* writing in the genre
* promoting student ownership of projects
* establishing specific criteria from which I would evaluate
* assessing projects according to the criteria

As teacher, I was the facilitator of these projects. I helped students brainstorm, encouraged them to talk with each other to explore their ideas, gave them time to write and plan each project and made arrangements for materials they would need to make their final presentations or products. I did not dictate what the projects specifically would be but I did give them structure.

At the beginning of the year I established a structure for what the written and performance projects would look like: all authored pieces would be written in ink, or typed; posters would be in color and would have a title; recited poetry would be memorized; skits would be at least 10 minutes long, etc. Instead of assigning the length of each writing, I encouraged students to be thoughtful and thorough in everything they wrote. As the year progressed, I turned the establishment and maintenance of these guidelines over to the students. They thought about what would contribute to a thorough presentation. During second semester, while planning how to present the dramatic sketch they had written, a group of kids asked, *"Can we go to the English office for paper? We really think we need to make a backdrop for our play so it is really good."*

The one time I neither stated guidelines nor asked students what ones

would be guiding their work, the projects were a disaster. Just before Christmas, we were reading S.E. Hinton's novel, The Outsiders. At the conclusion of the book, I asked each of four classes to brainstorm ways they would give a book report on this novel in any form but written. I was amazed at the number of items the four classes devised **(See Appendix A).** After the brainstorming sessions, I let them go to work on these projects, with no discussion of what each would look like, how long it would be, or what standards would be guiding their work.

The previous time students had presented projects with specific guidelines, the projects had been close to spectacular. Smugly I thought, "I don't have to tell them how these should look; they did it once, so of course they will do it again." Was I ever wrong! What had been beautifully illustrated and colorful posters the first time now came in as hastily drawn pictures in pencil on notebook paper. Artfully designed dioramas appeared the second time as a shoebox with a Barbie doll propped up in it. I had made the mistake of thinking that students would internalize one discussion of guidelines and carry it through each subsequent time. After this disaster, students established and wrote down guidelines as part of every conference. They had the choice of what guidelines they wished to follow (with suggestions from me only if I felt it ws necessary). By doing so, they had the responsibility of of deciding what determined excellence in their projects and how to carry it out. In response to my question to students about guidelines and how they felt about them, Shayne said, "I like doing things on my own, but I like some boundaries." One boundary she appreciated was the requirement that she complete everything in ink or in color; no final work could be in pencil. That appealed to her because she took pride in her writing and liked the permanence of that requirement.

Another way I encouraged choice was in the reading students did. Reading selections in each genre was fundamental to our projects. When materials were available, a variety of choices within the genre were in the classroom. Students then had a selection of folktales, what drama to choose or what poems to read. As a way to encourage good writing, I believed, as Zemelman and Daniels believed, that providing "rich reading experiences for young writers, both silent individual reading and whole class reading aloud" (Zemelman p. 22) would be the foundation from which students would have the courage to create their own version of the genre. There is a strong connection between reading widely and well, and writing well (Zemelman p. 23). Kids need to have the chance to read models and

examples of the kinds of writing they are expected to produce; when they do, they will internalize many of the qualities of good writing.

Students responded positively to the opportunity to choose what they would read. Cameron said, *"I liked it how we did it. I got to read at my own speed. I liked the stories I chose, and I'm glad I got to choose them 'cause I might not of liked a story that you would have picked for me."* Another comment students repeated was, "I *like it when we can read at your own pace and choose your own stories."* The freedom to choose her reading led Megan to state, " *I learned alot more than I would of learned if you picked the book. I think I learn more if it is a subject that I like."*

The books chosen for each genre stayed in the room throughout the reading and writing process. Students frequently referred back to their reading, whether to discover how to begin their writing or to check how drama looked when it was written. This was all part of the process of making meaning. As the students read, they constructed meaning from the text. The process continued as writing occurred.

The synthesis of what they learned through reading and what new ideas emerged during that reading resulted in the creation of an original piece of writing. As I said earlier, I wanted students <u>doing</u>, I wanted them to be authors. I felt that through the creation of a new text, they would give deeper meaning to the genre in which they were writing. This would be their opportunity to think on paper, to explore ideas and create their own verson, their own imaginative expression of the genre.

Students were responsible for their own written products, but the journey from idea to final story was collaborative. Students brainstormed, peer conferenced, revised, edited and shared stories with one another. They discovered that writing is a social interaction. As the year progressed, they clammored to share their writing with one another. In August, Jane wrote me a note in response to my request to students for any information that might help me to get to know them better: "If you make me read in front of the class, I will die, or at least cry." I was glad to know that; I would try to encourage her, but I certainly didn't want tears. I suggested she allow other students to read her writing aloud. When this happened,, it received positive audience response. By November, Jane was shouting and waving her arm in the air, begging for an opportunity to read in front of the class. This was a huge change from the first of the year when my

requests to read aloud were met with, "Do I have to?" The safe and trusting atmosphere we worked hard to create was responsible for Jane's (and many other students ') change from reluctant reader to constant volunteer.

Choice also was at the core of developing students' ownership of their writing. Ownership evolved as students discovered I was serious when I told them they could choose topics or subjects. I would not give them specific topics. Most of my seventh graders relished this freedom, but several fought it nearly the entire year. As soon as each writing assignment was given, Kit would raise her hand and the inevitable statement came forth, "I don't know what to write about." Each time, we would return to her writing portfolio to consult her personal inventory of interests **(See Appendix B)** and jottings about episodes in her life. Reluctantly, she would pick one and begin writing. She wanted me to decide, to choose an idea. I struggled with the temptation to just assign her a topic, but I knew if I did, it would be my story. She would return again and again with "Now what do I write?" Luckily I resisted. Sometime during the last three weeks of school she excitedly announced to me that she could hardly wait for our next writing assignment because she knew what she was going to write about. Kit never had difficulty being engaged in her writing once she began. As she assumed ownership of her writing, she became engaged, writing faster and writing a lot.

Finally, I felt it was important for students to know what criteria I thought was important to include in their writing. With each assignment, I would identify five criteria that were the primary traits of the genre in which they would write. This enabled them to focus on critical elements in that genre and gave them specifics to look for when revising together **(See Appendix C)**.

These criteria led to my focused assessment of their products when they were completed. I realized the criteria by which I chose to monitor learning would determine the kind of thinking that occurred. If I wanted to see that higher levels of thinking were occurring, then my criteria had to include requirements that evoked it.

The inclusion of all seven of these elements was necessary for this model to be successful. When one of them was not present, the creativity and thoughtful consideration of each project did not materialize.

THE PROJECTS

Students' projects appeared in many forms. But at the heart of each was writing. After reading *Where the Red Fern Grows,* students chose an episode from the novel and wrote it from another point of view. Because characterization was so well revealed through dialogue in this story, I also stated that dialogue was to be included in their episode. When I suggested an episode could be written from the point of view of one of the dogs, hands quickly flew in the air; students were ready to question my suggestion.

"A dog can't talk," stated my 5th hour pragmatist, Annie.

"Can you make it talk in your story, Mrs. O?" asked Rebecca.

"How about the raccoon telling about the Big Hunt?"

"Or the time the ghost coon saw Rainey get killed?"

"Can I write about a rock in the river?"

As a result of my positive response to each of their questions, students brainstormed characters , points of view and began writing. Their episodes became their own because they had carefully read the novel and referred back to their chosen episodes while they were creating original dialogue and characterization.

In addition to the episodes, the students gave book reports, but these were book reports that were posters, dioramas, interviews, etc. that displayed their understanding of the book. I gave them a list of ideas and encouraged them to come up with their own (**See Appendix D**). And they did!

John wrote a song which he said "expressed the love between Old Dan and Little Ann." He played the music on his computer and recorded it for the class. Arthur wrote a four-page newspaper which highlighted the events of the story. Libby and Bill reenacted and videotaped a crucial scene from the book, complete with original dialogue. A number of students chose projects I suggested, but many created their own. With the freedom to

make decisions about how to best display their understanding of this novel, they chose ways that were most comfortable for them; this allowed their imaginations to blossom.

From the writings and presentations, it was clear to me that higher levels of thinking were occurring. John was evaluating what emotions were most significant between the dogs and then expressed it in an original piece of music. When Arthur wrote the newspaper, he analyzed the text to determine what was most significant and then created a format to highlight those parts of the story. When Libby and Bill created original dialogue, they were determining what were the crucial elements in the episode and how to express them verbally.

What also fascinated me was that by establishing a community of learners where thoughtfulness, creativity and risk-taking were encouraged, yes, critical thinking occurred. What I also saw was the same recursiveness we see in the writing process. This process doesn't progress linearly from reading to prewriting to drafting to revising, etc., never looking back at what has gone before. Constantly we revise while we draft, stop to read in the middle of editing, always look back as we go forward. So it is in establishing a community of thoughtful learners. We strive first to establish an atomosphere conducive to higher literacy by insuring the classroom is a safe place to take risks and by encouraging creativity through careful decision making. When this has occurred and higher levels of thinking are occurring through the active kinds of learning that develop young minds to their potential (Brown, Basic Ed.), a phenomenon occurs. The community itself becomes more thoughtful, more attuned to itself. It asks how it can be more caring about its participants which in turns requires the participants to constantly preserve the thoughtfulness of the community. The cycle continues.

I believe that the freedom to make decisions is at the root of this phenomenon. When students are given the freedom and confidence to make choices about their learning , they are also given the freedom to make choices about how they will treat others in their classroom community . When they understand they can take risks intellectually, they also see that they can take risks socially and personally. By honestly asking for what they need in their community to grow as thinkers, they are actually adding to the thoughtful relationships a community needs to support learning.

As I look ahead to next year, I too, am looking over my shoulder at what has transpired in my classroom. I feel a sense of satisfaction that the first kernel of an idea grew into the Decisive Writer's Model. I feel it promoted the idea of students as careful decision makers who could produce creative products. I discovered that it was not so important what my curricular choices were; I could choose entirely different materials next year but if I used the processes in this Model, then imaginative thinking would be woven throughout the genres.

I also have several things I will strive to change in the classroom next year. I was so busy developing and orchestrating this model that I really wasn't as active a participant in it as I would like to be. I focused on fulfilling my role as teacher -facilitator, but I need to have an additional role, that of teacher-as-writer. I may be the only adult writer they will ever see working. They can see me as I work through a piece, step by step. They will see that writing doesn't have to be "perfect " the first time, nor does it get easier or neater as you get better at it (Zemelman, p.24). If kids truly have ownership of their writing, and I let them carry on that struggle, then I should have time to write with them.

I also need to be a better kid watcher. As I said before, I was so busy constructing this model and modifying it throughout the year that I didn't have the freedom to actually sit back and observe everything that was occurring. I hope next year to improve my kid watching in two ways. First, with the established Model, I won't need to spend as much time watching and wondering what is missing . Second, I intend to use videotaping in addition to my watching. It is so difficult to see or hear what may be going on in one group while talking to another. Videotaping by another individual who can capture many aspects of the kids in the classroom may allow me to see things which would otherwise escape me.

An additional change I intend to make is how I determine the criteria by which I will assess students' writing. Together we established guidelines for the non-written projects but I determined what the criteria were for the written work. Next year I will involve the students in the development of those criteria. After indepth reading of a particular genre we can establish these criteria together. Students will need to analyze carefully each genre in order to decide what the primary traits are. This too, should enrich the genre for them.

The development of this model has clarified my thinking about the role of decision making for students. While struggling with what it is that allows students to create orginal work, I realized that the freedom to chose how they express themselves was the way to liberate their imaginations.

APPENDIX A: PROJECT IDEAS FOR THE OUTSIDERS

1. Interview
2. Posters - scenes from the book
3. Collage - things about characters or scenes
4. Map of the east side and west side of town
5. 3-D poster
6. Mask of one of the characters
7. Car diorama
8. Car model
9. Act out scene - Reader's Theater
10. Draw what clothes look like, or make a costume
11. Dress Barbie and Ken dolls as Greasers and Socs
12. Make a movie
13. Dress in costume
    - either give a report
    - or act out a scene
14. Take an episode and make the outcome different - other world theory
15. Depict reality and fantasy for a character- what is really happening in his life and what he wishes was happening
16. Memorize and perform the poem, "Nothing Gold can Stay."
17. Time Line
18. Prepare the Curtis boys' breakfast and share it with the class
19. Make a mobile
20. Depict a hierarcy. Ex: Show the social classes and relationships to each other on a chart.
21. Build a drive-in movie and put in appropriate characters.
22. Create a plot chart according to the events in the novel.
23. Make a mosiaic.
24. Perform a "Cop Rock" interpretation of a scene.

APPENDIX B: PERSONAL INVENTORY

EPISODES AND INTERESTS; SOME STARTING POINTS FOR WRITING

Your own experiences, ideas, adventures, interests, and misadventures are the starting point for good writing. Here are a few categories where you probably have ideas and stories well worth writing about. Under each category, jot down the significant incidents and episodes in your life.

EARLY CHILDHOOD; THings you did when you were younger and wiser)or not as wise as you thought). Memories of family. Things you did that scared the daylights out of you or others. Holidays. Disappointments. Being ill. Being happy.

PEOPLE. Friends, enemies, rivals, unforgettable characters, relatives, people who frightened you, people who supported you.

FOND MEMORIES. Moments you'd like to relive.

NOT-SO-FOND MEMORIES. Never again!

ARGUMENTS, QUARRELS, AND FIGHTS.

FIRSTS. First love, first movie, first experience with death, first snowfall, first day at school.

SCHOOL. Academic and nonacademic concerns. The library. Favorite classes. Sports. People or topics in the administration.

OPTIONS. What are the possibilities you see for yourself in coming years? School. Jobs. Family.

CONTEMPORARY CULTURE. What are your interests in books? In films? In music?

LANDMARKS. Each of us has a number of landmarks or turning points in his or her life. Moments of truth. Crucial decisions. Meeting the right or wrong person. Make a list of the landmarks in your life. (The list might even look like a table of contents for your autobiography.)

After you have finished jotting down ideas in each category, run through the list a second time. Place a check or an asterick by each topic that especially interests you or that you think might interst others.

APPENDIX C: Criteria Evaluation Sheets

Criteria for Writing a Dramatic Sketch:

1. The title, list of characters and important details of the setting are at the beginning of the sketch.

2. The story is told through dialogue between characters.

3. Stage directions are included whenever there is a special effect, lighting or scene change or movement of character(s).

4. Dialogue sounds natural when spoken aloud.

5. Final copy is written in ink (or typewritten) and is free of grammar and spelling errors.

Criteria for Writing Children's Literature :

1. Story follows a particular pattern seen in children's literature.

2. Story makes the child want to turn the page.

3. The illustrations combine with the text to create a complete story.

4. The text is concise and to the point.

5. Neatness, eye appeal and lack of errors.

Criteria for writing episode from *Where the Red Fern Grows:*

1. The episode is written from a different point of view.

2. The epsidoe is true to the events in the story.

3. There is dialogue in the episode.

4. Editing (Includes correct writing of dialogue).

APPENDIX D: Project Ideas for the Novel, Where the Red Fern Grows

1. Choose a scene from the novel to depict in a mural or poster. You can draw or paint the scene with whatever art materials you are most comfortable. Be sure that you include the proper time of day and the proper trees, bushes , animals or any other details that should be included. Write a caption that indentifies the scene. Be prepared to present your poster to the class.

2. Draw a map of the land that is the setting for the novel. You can use a map of the area of Oklahoma that includes the town of Talhequah, the Illinois River, and the Ozark Mountains as the basis for your own map. Fill in locations from the novel such as Billy's farm, Grandpa's store, and the site of the Championship Coon Hunt. You can also include the sites of important events in places where you imagine they occurred. Use appropriate colors if you wish, and show your map to the class when you are finished.

3. Choose a character from the novel who you would like to get to know better, such as Grandpa, the Sheriff, or Mama. Prepare a list of questions for an interview with this character. Be sure that your questions will enable you to know the character more. Then, prepare a list of answers based on what you know about the character and how you imagine the character would answer. If you wish, have a partner answer your questions, taking the role of the character.

4. Choose a scene in the novel that would be appropriate for a dramatic presentation to the class. Reread the scene you choose and record any dialogue from the novel; you might want to add some of your own to increase the effectiveness of your presentation. If you do, be sure that the dialogue reflects how the characters might act and what they might say. Prepare your dialogue, assign parts to other students. Rehearse and present the scene to the class.

5. Choose a scene from the novel and create a design for it to be depicted in a diorama. A diorama is a three-dimensional, miniature recreation. First, draw a diagram of the scene you wish to reconstruct, with all the details you plan to include. Make a list of the materials you will need to consruct your diorama correctly. Then create it, bring it to school and

present it to the class.

6. Choose a character form the novel and design a costume, showing both front and back views. Review descriptions of the character's dress to be sure you have not missed any details. If you wish, make an actual costume instead of a finished drawing. Make the consume in miniature proportions and put it on a doll, or make it in your size, bring it to school, and model it for the class.

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